

“Forgiveness and What Comes of It”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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I’m an incredibly fast typist. Now what does this have to do with Easter? The connection is coincidental. When I type something that I want to read to you later, my fingers sometimes get confused, but they’re not acting apart from my brain, even when my brain is acting up. In preparing the story that I shared with you earlier, that story about “Daffodils waking,” I was imagining just what it’s like for those daffodils to transform ever so slowly from bulbs – the kind planted by the children in the story told by Jim and dramatized by Grace and Brodie and Abigail and Kirk – into blossoms – the kind we’re not sure will ever appear, just like the children in the story weren’t so sure. Transformation takes time, usually a lot more than we imagine. Karen Lewis Foley, who reported in the bluster of March coming upon the sign “Daffodils waking,” had been just as dubious, given winter’s reluctance to let go. She guessed that “Someone was hoping against the evidence that somewhere under the earth, the daffodil bulbs were still there and starting to wake up.”

This is what I typed: “Someone was hoping against the evidence that somewhere under the *heart*, the daffodil bulbs were still there and starting to wake up.” Not somewhere under the earth, but somewhere under the heart, the daffodil bulbs were waking. Well....earth...heart, same letters, same idea. Spring and Easter invite both to open. Neither will happen unless they do. Neither will emerge from their tombs unless earth and heart open.

Let’s go back to that other story, the one by Mark, who reported on a tomb that we hear about every Easter, the one that Jesus is said to have walked out of, the one in which the crucified and definitely dead Jesus was laid and from which he is said to have risen from death itself.

Mark described three women going to the tomb just after sunrise. They went to anoint Jesus’ body and were worried about who would roll away the boulder that had been placed at the entrance to this cave-like tomb. To their amazement, this had already been done. To their further amazement, they met a young man at the entrance who said to them, “Don’t be so surprised; you’re looking for Jesus, the one who was crucified. He has risen; he’s not here. Go tell Peter and his other disciples that he’s headed for Galilee, where you will see him!” They fled, astonished and terrified, and they said not a word to anyone. Clearly, word got out. The story has been told and retold, edited, and re-edited.

Whether or not Jesus rose from death itself, we don’t know. What we do know is that everything that death represented – an end point, emptiness, darkness, defeat, oppression – was called into question by how Jesus lived and what he taught. Resurrection breaks the bondage of hearts captive to despair, like daffodils break the bondage of soil captive to winter’s harshness. Resurrection breaks the hardness of our hearts when we can’t let go and must if we’re to know the fullness of life. Resurrection isn’t just an Easter morning kind of thing.

Mark’s Gospel begins not with Jesus’ birth, but with his baptism by his cousin, John, who preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,” an act marking the opening of one’s heart to radical love. Once Jesus was baptized, he started preaching and teaching this radical love. This was not such an easy message in his time and in his country that was occupied by Rome, imperialist Rome in cahoots with the high priests who wanted to hold onto the last morsel of power and prestige in the temple of Jerusalem that had once been the hub of devout religious practice.

Now let's fast forward from Jesus' early teaching to his final days. Jesus' chosen work as teacher and preacher of radical love did not go over well at all with the powers that were. Eventually, he suffered the fate that so many Jews and others suffered who resisted imperialist Rome. He was crucified. He wasn't even judged guilty by the official who made the final decision. A deal was made. Off he was marched to suffer the horrific form of capital punishment all too common in his time. Jesus was crucified.

Mark tells us that at about three o'clock in the afternoon, Jesus let out a loud cry and took his last breath. And then he tells us that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom." What did this mean? It probably didn't mean that the curtain of the temple was actually torn in two. Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan explain that the temple curtain separated the holiest part of the temple – the inner sanctum – from the rest of the sanctuary. In this most holy space, God was supposed to be most present. Even the high priest could enter this space only once a year. A ripping of the temple curtain extends God's presence into the wider area of the sanctuary. It is "to affirm that the execution of Jesus means that access to the presence of God was now open." This is a dramatic shift in how the Jewish religion might be practiced and tells us that everything that Jesus stood for and preached about was for the purpose of liberating the people from a system of domination that had so oppressed them.

What else does Mark tell us about these moments after Jesus' took his last breath? He tells us that a centurion, a Roman soldier who had helped execute Jesus, faced him and said, "Truly, this man was a son of God!" Borg and Crossan explain that under the Roman Empire, only the emperor was to be recognized as the Son of God. Yet the centurion, a man beholden to the Emperor, does an about face. In the presence of Jesus, he recognizes a man of God and is freed from the bondage of empire.

The message of radical love was a message that did that. It freed people to be in God's presence. It freed victims of a brutal empire, even a Roman soldier, to speak a different truth. Whether these things actually happened isn't the point, but rather that Jesus' life and teachings liberated. The stage was set for the story of resurrection.

Again, whether the crucified Jesus walked out of a tomb isn't the point, but that Mark and others felt so intensely the liberation of Jesus' life and teachings, that they tell the story of Jesus bursting the bonds of death itself.

As a humble daffodil breaks through hardened soil, so radical love breaks through the bonds of conventional religion, imperial oppression, and death itself. It was a new day, because love happened like it hadn't happened before. It is Easter. Hope still lives that love – compassionate, radical, truth-telling, liberating love – is possible. May the hope that is Easter live in our hearts and our lives. Amen.

Sources:

The Gospel According to Mark, in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha*, and the *Revised Standard Version Bible*.

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem*, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, 2006.

Karen Lewis Foley, "Daffodils Waking," in *For All That Is Our Life: A Meditation Anthology*, Helen and Eugene Pickett, Editors, Skinner House Books, Boston, 2005, 42-43.